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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000876

SENSITIVE
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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, NEA/PPD, ECA, IIP, R

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/07/2018
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KPAO](#) [OEXC](#) [OIIP](#) [SCUL](#) [SY](#) [XF](#)
SUBJECT: KEEPING UP THE EFFORT ON PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN SYRIA

REF: DAMASCUS 829

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 b and d

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: In spite of the Syrian government's decision to close the American Cultural Center, Embassy Damascus is pursuing all available programming tools to advance mission goals of promoting freedom of expression, the exchange and development of ideas on political and economic reform, respect for human rights, and the development of civil society and the rule of law. To do so effectively, Embassy Damascus needs the Department's full support to continue pursuing high-profile public diplomacy activities in a fast-changing, difficult program environment. We request the Department support the following specific Embassy requests: funding for a Syrian production crew to cover the Kennedy Center's February 2009 Arabesque Festival, featuring performances by well-known artists and musicians in Syria, encouraging new Administration visitors who are traveling to Syria to conduct public diplomacy, organizing Syrian participation in a PA/OBS TV Co-op Program, and maintaining and/or increasing the number of Syrians who participate in USG-funded exchange programs. END SUMMARY.

Embassy Outreach Continues

12. (C) While the SARG's October 29 edict ordering the closure of the American Cultural Center was designed to curtail our outreach to the Syrian public, Embassy Damascus has largely ignored this decision. We continue to engage a broad cross section of Syrians through exchange programs, electronic outreach, and representational events, but we have been unable to use our own facility for public events. Damascus 829 details our considerable day-to-day public diplomacy activities.

Takin, It To The Streets

13. (U) To underscore to the Syrian people the importance of American democratic values and counter misinformation and stereotypes, we want to expose the Syrian public to an accurate picture of the United States through three specific projects. First, approximately 250 Syrian performers will be featured in the Kennedy Center's February 2009 Arabesque Festival. We want to send a Syrian film crew and presenter to document their experience. Second, the PA/OBS Co-op Program is a highly successful and very visible means to reach a large audience. We request Department support for an independent Syrian documentary team to participate in the FY 2009 program. Third, we would like to host a well-known musician, performer or comedian for a large public event and a series of smaller events in Syria.

14. (U) The hundred plus Syrians who participate in USG

exchange programs annually are the bricks and mortar of a freer society in Syria. To that end, we must maintain our current number of exchange visitors, and we support an increase in our annual allotments. While exchange visitors will always encounter travel obstacles in Syria, there remains a qualified applicant pool willing to push the limits of their government's permissiveness. Embassy Damascus would benefit from continued Department flexibility when we confront last minute cancellations and changes.

¶5. (U) In anticipation of a possible increase in the number of official and unofficial Administration visitors to Syria, we request that these visitors be encouraged to participate in an outreach event -- media interview or editorial board meeting, public lecture, representational event, or alumni gathering while in Syria.

¶6. (SBU) COMMENT: In spite of increasing SARG harassment of public diplomacy -- or perhaps because of it -- it is more important than ever to sustain our Embassy public diplomacy activities here. Post is grateful for the Department's logistical, administrative, and financial support. END COMMENT.
CONNELLY